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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the immersion approach to second language instruction contains: a description of the approach and its goals; a brief history of its introduction into public schools; a description of the most common immersion program designs (early total, early partial, middle or delayed, and late); a review of available information on program results concerning effects on English skills, second language skills, and the learning of subject content material, achievement as related to IQ and learning disabilities, differences between partial and total immersion programs, and outcomes from late immersion; an examination of the benefits of early immersion; a description of the distribution of programs in the United States and of the Milwaukee, Wisconsin public schools program; and an analysis of the theoretical foundations of the approach and links to other second language instructional approaches. (MSE)

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The Immersion Approach: Principle and Practice

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The immersion approach to second language instruction at the elementary level has received much attention recently because it holds the promise of achieving a goal that elementary second language programs have been unable to accomplish in the past. That goal is functional proficiency in the second language. Students who complete the entire sequence of an elementary immersion program are able to communicate in the second language on topics appropriate to their age level. In addition to the goal of achieving functional proficiency in the second language, immersion programs have as a further goal the mastery of subject content material taught through the second language.

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of the immersion approach and to attempt to provide answers to the most frequently asked questions. The article contains definitions, descriptions, goals, history, enrollments, program options, and the advantages of early immersion over other immersion models. The article also briefly attempts to establish theoretical foundations and discuss possible links between immersion and other kinds of approaches.

What Is Immersion?

Language immersion is an approach to second language instruction in which the usual curricular activities are conducted in a second language. The second language, therefore, is the *medium* of instruction rather than the *object* of instruction. An immersion program can begin at any level—at the beginning of elementary school where it is called early immersion; toward the end of elementary school where it is called middle or delayed immersion; or in middle school, junior high, or high school where it is called late immersion.

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Immersion programs vary in the amount of time spent in the second language each day. In total immersion programs the second language is used throughout the school day during the first two or three years of the program. In partial immersion programs, instruction takes place in the second language for at least half of the school day. Of all models and approaches to second language acquisition, the immersion approach, by the nature of its design, is easily able to integrate language study into the pattern of the normal school curriculum.

The common goals of immersion programs may be stated as follows (see, for example, Lambert and Tucker, 12; Campbell, 3; Swain, 19):

1. Students will achieve functional proficiency in the second language.
2. Students will maintain and continue to develop skills in their first language.
3. Students will master subject content at their appropriate grade level.
4. Students will acquire an understanding and appreciation of another language and culture which will in no way detract from their appreciation of their home culture.

Establishment of Public School Immersion Programs

The idea of putting language learners in the environment where they must use the language is certainly not a new one. In 1965 a group of English-speaking parents encouraged the establishment of the first public school immersion program, a kindergarten class in St. Lambert, Quebec. These parents were concerned that traditional French programs did not meet their children's needs for greater comprehension and fluency at a time when bilingualism had become an important issue in Canada. Immersion programs in Canada have grown to the extent that French programs are now offered in every province with approximately 160,000 students, according to statistics from Canadian Parents for French (21). Immersion programs have spread to the United States where in 1983 there were almost 5000 students enrolled (Rhodes and Schreibstein, 15), and in 1985 there were almost 7000 students enrolled in French, German, and Spanish programs (9).

Early Total Immersion

Students in early total immersion programs begin their study of the second language in kindergarten or first grade. These programs take advantage of children's language acquisition in a natural setting where the new language is the only means of communication. From the time the children arrive at school in the morning, they hear only the second language spoken by the teacher. All classroom conversation and instructions are in the second language. In this way the children acquire the second language in play and work situations that are related to meaningful communication. Emphasis is on the learning activity (for example, reading, mathematics, social studies, art) and not on the language.

Students enrolled in the program are monolingual English-speaking children. Teachers are native or near-native speakers of the second language. Because all students in immersion classes are monolingual, they begin on an equal footing with regard to second language skills. The children tend to show little anxiety or frustration about learning in another language because what they learn is within their experience and because every effort is made to put language into a meaningful context. They learn, for example, to speak and write about things they understand: in kindergarten, a lesson on objects that sink and float; in first grade, a trip to the fire station; in second grade, a lesson on magnets; in sixth grade, a lesson on Wisconsin's history.

In the immersion classroom, students initially communicate with each other in English. They also use English to communicate with the teacher who responds in the second language. This reduces anxiety and allows a silent period in which students can begin to build their comprehension. Within a year and a half to two years in the program, students move rather automatically into speech production. Reading skills are introduced through the second language. This approach is markedly different from that of most bilingual education programs in which reading is introduced in the first language. After two or three years in an early total immersion program, students are introduced to formal English language arts for thirty minutes to an hour each day. As students progress through the middle grades, the amount of English is gradually increased until in grades five or six, there is a balance between the second language and English. Slight variations often occur in program design depending upon

the needs, desires, and resources of the school district; but the basic concept, goals, and methodology of the immersion approach remain the same.

Early Partial Immersion Programs

The difference between early partial immersion programs and early total immersion programs is that in partial immersion only 50 percent of the instruction is in the second language. Students learn to read in both languages at the same time, beginning in the first grade. In partial immersion programs, the amount of second language instruction usually remains constant throughout the elementary school program. Some school administrators have opted for partial rather than total immersion because of cost, scheduling, or the fear often held by parents that students in total immersion programs would lack native language skills.

Middle or Delayed Immersion Programs

In middle or delayed immersion programs, the use of the second language as a major medium of instruction is delayed until grades four or five. Students often have a traditional second language course in the primary grades before they enter the delayed immersion program (Genesee, 8).

Late Immersion Programs

Late immersion programs are those that begin at the end of elementary school, or in middle school or high school. Many students entering late immersion programs have had previous foreign language instruction in FLES programs. In many cases students are taught a class in language arts in the second language, along with at least two subject content areas. Genesee (8) has defined late immersion programs as programs in which at least half the school day is spent in the second language with at least two subject content areas taught through the second language.

Immersion Program Results

Teachers and administrators in both Canadian and American school districts have been concerned that students will not achieve well in the

basic subject areas and will fall behind students in traditional English-only classes. Beginning with the original St. Lambert study (Lambert and Tucker, 12), research coming from immersion programs in Canada consistently documents the positive effects of the immersion approach:

1. Immersion students perform as well as their English-educated peers on tests of English skills (Swain, 17; 18; 19).
2. Students acquire remarkable proficiency in the second language compared to students in traditional second language programs (Swain, 17).
3. They show equal or superior performance to their monolingual English-speaking peers in subject content mastery (Swain, 19).
4. Immersion education is effective for children with below average IQ (Swain, 19) or with language learning disabilities (Bruck, 2).
5. Immersion students "develop more friendly and open attitudes toward French-Canadians" (Lambert, 11).

Effects on English Skills

Research results (Swain, 17; 18; 19) show that students in early immersion programs perform as well as their English-educated peers or often outperform them on tests of achievement in English. Immersion students are initially behind English-only students in their English skills but catch up within a year after the English component is introduced into the curriculum. Students develop literacy skills in the second language, which are transferred to the first language. Although first-grade students were initially behind English-only students for a short period of time, they were found to be more sensitive to the needs of the listener in their oral communication skills (Genesee, Lambert, and Tucker, 7).

Effects on Second Language Skills

Students acquire remarkable proficiency in the second language compared to students in traditional second language programs. Swain has described the effects of immersion programs on the second language skills of students as follows:

> The results reveal consistently superior performance in French skills as compared to students who have had a traditional program of French instruction.

> The results also show that the immersion students score as well on French proficiency instruments as thirty percent of the native-speaking students. After six or seven years in an immersion program, student performance in the areas of listening and reading approaches native-like levels, whereas in the areas of speaking and writing, many differences between immersion and Francophone students still remain. [17, p. 22]

Although children in immersion programs develop a functional proficiency far beyond what can be accomplished in a traditional foreign language program and become functionally bilingual and literate in two languages, their second language skills are not native-like with respect to all characteristics of vocabulary and grammar. Swain summarized the distinction: "This does not mean that the children were unable to say what they wanted to, but they used numerous strategies or techniques to say what they did not have the grammatical means to say" (18, p. 492).

Another look at second language skills of children in early immersion programs comes from the Spanish program in Culver City, California:

> While the children's speech is typically accented, the children produce a very high percentage of linguistic forms required in any given utterance in adherence to the linguistic rules of Spanish. In fact, the students' degree of grammaticality, that is, the correct selection of lexical and grammatical forms and the correct pronunciation in the production and comprehension of Spanish utterances, far exceeds the degree of ungrammaticality. [Campbell, 3, pp. 132–33]

One reason for the difference between speech of immersion students and their native-speaking peers may be the lack of interaction among immersion students and native speakers. The only native-speaker model that students have available to them is their classroom teacher. Otherwise, the only spoken second language they hear is that of their non-native-speaking classmates. Further development of their second language skills is dependent on interaction with native speakers of the language, either in or out of school. If immersion students were in a situation where they needed to modify their language, these children should be able to move quickly and efficiently toward more native-like speech. Additionally, the number of contact hours a native speaker has with the language by the end of the sixth grade exceeds the number of contact hours possible in an immersion program.

Effects on the Learning of Subject Content Material

Immersion students do well in academic achievement. They show equal or superior performance to their monolingual English-speaking peers in measures of subject content mastery in mathematics, science, and social studies (Swain, 19). Tests of cognitive abilities and subject content achievement are administered in English, even though the students are taught through the second language.

Achievement in Immersion Programs as Related to IQ and Learning Disabilities

A common impression is that immersion education is only for children of above average intelligence. If this were true, above average students would have higher scores in tests of second language proficiency than below average students, given the usual relationship between IQ and academic achievement. On tests of literacy-related skills (Swain, 17; Genesee, 6), above average students performed better than below average students. It was found, however, that having an above or below average IQ made no difference in their performance of interpersonal communication skills. Below average students understood as much spoken French as above average students, and they were rated as highly as above average students on all measures of oral production.

These studies suggest that IQ does not play a more significant role in the success of a student in immersion than it does in the success of a student in the regular monolingual program. According to Swain:

> Below average students were able to benefit from French immersion as much as the average and above average students in terms of acquiring interpersonal communication skills in the second language. Furthermore, from the English language testing that was carried out with the same samples of students, there was no evidence that the below average students in French immersion were farther behind in English skills development than were the below average students in the regular English program. [19, p. 102]

Basically the same conclusion has been reached concerning children with language learning disabilities. It has been found that children with language learning disabilities who have followed the traditional French-as-a-Second-Language program acquire little knowledge of French be-

cause the teaching method seems to exploit areas where they have difficulty: "memory work, repetition of language out of context; explicit teaching of abstract rules" (Bruck, 2, p. 885). If learning disabled children are to acquire a second language in school, therefore, immersion appears to be a much better context in which they can achieve this goal.

Differences between Partial and Total Immersion Programs

When looking at differences between partial and total immersion programs, results are somewhat as expected: the more contact hours, the better the second language proficiency of the students. In studies of French language skills (Swain, 17), it has been found that partial immersion students do not perform as well as total immersion students of the same grade level, but they tend to perform as well as total immersion students in lower grade levels who have had similar amounts of contact time with French. In learning content materials, early partial immersion students tend to perform equivalently or not as well as their English-educated peer groups. One explanation for this difference may lie in Cummins's hypothesis (5) that states that learners must attain a threshold level in their second language in order to be able to benefit from instruction in that language. The threshold level, however, has not been defined at this time. This is certainly an area in which further research is needed.

Results from Late Immersion Programs

Outcomes from late immersion programs with respect to subject content mastery, maintenance of first language skills, and development of second language skills are difficult to summarize because of the variety of formats available. Swain (17) states that if there is sufficient core French instruction prior to the program and if sufficient additional courses are taken in French following the program, high levels of French proficiency can be attained, with no loss to the mastery of content material or native language proficiency.

Benefits of Early Immersion

One of the most obvious benefits of early immersion education is the long sequence of time available for students to achieve proficiency in the

second language. This proficiency prepares students to survive communicatively in a native-speaking environment with the expectation that the students' speech will become increasingly native-like. Early immersion makes bilingualism possible for the largest number of students because functional proficiency in the second language at that level is not necessarily tied to literacy skills.

Because students in early immersion programs develop proficiency in the second language very quickly, it is possible to acquire the fluency needed to deal with subject content areas without difficulty. This is not the case in partial or late immersion programs in which the level of vocabulary required in a subject content course may be beyond the language ability of students. Much less time is required to develop the equivalent results on tests of achievement in English in total immersion programs than in partial immersion programs.

A final point in favor of early immersion programs is the apparent enthusiasm and aptitude that young children demonstrate for language learning. Swain characterizes this as "feelings of ease, comfort and naturalness in using the second language" (17, p. 26). In contrast, older students may have had experiences or formed negative attitudes that may jeopardize second language learning (Genesee, 8). Because early immersion programs are an integral part of the elementary school day, they do not compete with other activities for prominence.

Immersion Programs in the United States

As research information from immersion programs was disseminated, immersion programs spread rapidly in Canada. Immersion programs have also been established in the United States where a completely different set of realities regarding second language learning exists. Immersion programs in the United States have been established for a variety of reasons, most of which center on a search for alternative approaches to successful second language teaching for young children.

The first immersion program in the United States was established in Spanish in Culver City, California, in the fall of 1971 with the help of the University of California-Los Angeles. Subsequently, programs were added in Montgomery County, Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; San Diego, California; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Orem, Utah; Holliston, Massachusetts; Baton

Rouge, Louisiana; and Rochester, New York. Most programs are French and Spanish, except for Milwaukee and Cincinnati where German programs also exist. Likewise, all these programs are total immersion, except for Cincinnati where there is a partial immersion program. (For more information, see Rhodes and Schreibstein, 15.) Immersion programs in the United States were established either at neighborhood schools with neighborhood school enrollment or as magnet schools to aid in integration in large urban school districts.

Two examples of immersion experience in the United States are Culver City, California, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Results from the Culver City program are similar to those of the St. Lambert study. English-speaking students acquire competence in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing in Spanish, while maintaining English language proficiency. These students also perform at the same level as their English-speaking age group in content subjects such as mathematics and science (Cohen, 4).

Milwaukee Immersion Program

The Milwaukee Public Schools began with a total immersion program in German in 1977 as part of the integration plan for the city. French was added in 1978 and Spanish in 1980.

The goals of the Milwaukee program are modeled on goals of the St. Lambert experiment. They state that students who complete the immersion program from kindergarten through grade six will meet the following goals:

1. Communicate (understand, speak, read, and write) in the second language with ability approximating that of a pupil who is native to that language.
2. Perform in English language arts as well as or better than their monolingual peers.
3. Acquire a greater understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of other cultures.
4. Achieve such proficiency in the second language and in English that they are able to pursue their studies with ease in both languages.
5. Achieve skills and knowledge in all subject areas equal to or greater than their monolingual peers.

Research results are similar to those from Culver City and Canada. Milwaukee's standardized testing program utilizes the Metropolitan Achievement Test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Results over the last eight years are based on a student population that comes from diverse geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds and that has a wide range of intellectual ability. Approximately 40 percent of the students are black; about 10 percent are Spanish surnamed, Native American, and Asian students; and the remaining 50 percent are white. There are no criteria for entrance into the immersion program except parent interest. Students are randomly selected from extensive waiting lists.

Test results show that Milwaukee's immersion students consistently score well above citywide and national averages in standardized tests in English language arts and mathematics. In the 1981 Grade 3 results from the German program, for example, 100 percent of the pupils scored in the average to above average range on the Metropolitan Achievement Test for Reading (in English) compared to 70 percent for Milwaukee Schools as a whole and 77 percent for norm groups throughout the United States. Similar results were found in mathematics test scores.

The following generalizations apply to the test results of immersion students in Milwaukee:

1. Students in the immersion program are achieving at or above ability level.
2. Students at every grade level are performing much better than citywide or national samples on English tests.
3. Student test scores are increasing grade by grade.

Theoretical Foundations and Links to Other Approaches

It is interesting to consider immersion methodology in relationship to some of the theoretical foundations to which it is linked. The immersion approach is based on the premise that second language learning is similar to first language learning and that people learn a second language in context where they experience it in its natural form and where they are socially motivated to communicate (Lambert, 11). It is based on the belief that much language learning can occur during the nonlanguage class in much the same way that first language acquisition occurs when children are communicating with others about nonlanguage issues (Genesee, 8).

Of the current theoretical positions held by researchers dealing with second language acquisition, those formulated by Krashen (10) seem most closely related to the immersion approach. Immersion succeeds because it allows comprehensible input with a focus on meaning (acquisition) instead of a focus on form (learning). Because there is no formal grammar instruction in the early stages of an immersion program, students acquire rather than learn a language. The immersion approach provides an acquisition-rich environment for the second language learner. The learner is able to deduce meaning from experiences, concrete examples, and abundant visual realia found in the immersion classroom (Met, 14). To use Krashen's terminology, in the immersion classroom "the affective filter is down" because anxiety and frustration are easily minimized. Affective variables in an immersion program are high motivation, keen parent interest, and the enriching experience of being in the immersion classroom.

The Natural Approach (Terrell, 20) and the immersion approach have the following factors in common:

1. Students are allowed to respond in their native language until they are sufficiently comfortable to respond in the target language.
2. The instructor does not correct developmental errors during acquisition activities. In the immersion approach the focus is usually on errors of fact and not errors of form. Errors of form are usually treated indirectly.
3. Instructional activities take into account various factors such as current target language proficiency, age, and the immediate linguistic needs of class members; and all classroom activities support acquisition rather than learning.

In the Natural Approach, the study of a foreign language includes both acquisition and learning activities; however, formal language learning activities are not an important feature in the immersion approach and are delayed until the students reach an appropriate developmental level for such activities. This approach parallels that of the monolingual English language arts curriculum.

Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) approach (1) demands that language be taught in a meaningful context. This approach enables students to see the cause-and-effect relationship between language and human

behavior, just as immersion students see it on a daily basis in their regular classroom communication. In the immersion approach as in TPR, comprehension precedes production.

The immersion approach and the Suggestopedia method originated by Lozanov (13) share the idea that an intensive exposure to a supersaturated learning environment is a key factor in language acquisition. Lozanov suggests that the most efficient language learning takes place only where the learner is immersed in an environment to which he or she is actively receptive.

It would be possible to extend this list of relationships between immersion and other approaches. The immersion approach, especially total immersion, has the advantage of an environment that can encompass an entire school day with all the myriad opportunities for real, context-embedded, meaningful communication that can occur in such an environment.

Conclusion

While there is great variety in the types of immersion programs now functioning and while there are still areas that need further investigation, it is apparent that the immersion concept in second language education is a sound one. Extensive studies have shown that children benefit from such an approach to second language acquisition and do not suffer a loss of native language skill development. They not only become functionally proficient in a second language but also develop average or above average skills in their native language.

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